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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANILA 002287

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SUBJECT: PEACE PROCESS ON TRACK WITH IMPORTANT WORK AHEAD

REF: MANILA 01974

Classified By: DCM Paul Jones, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: A recent series of meetings in Manila and Mindanao with leaders of the government negotiating team, MILF and MNLF insurgents and the powerful Ampatuan clan confirmed the peace process is on track, but that the government faces a politically difficult compromise on territory. Malaysia and the OIC appear to be working to unite MILF and MNLF insurgents in support of a coordinated peace, but there is much work ahead on that front. After President Arroyo assured the Ambassador of her support for concluding an agreement with the MILF this year, Embassy has stepped up public and private messages that now is the time for final compromise for peace. We are also calling on all of Mindanao's diverse communities, including Christian, native Lumad and Muslim, to come together to define Mindanao's future self-government within the Philippines. End Summary

Government Negotiator Resigns, Malaysian Facilitator Visits

¶2. (C) The Government's chief MILF negotiator Secretary Afable told DCM June 19 that his recent resignation would not impact negatively on the peace negotiations with the MILF, nor on the overall peace process in Mindanao. The MILF negotiations are largely complete, he claimed, and now it is up to the President's cabinet to support the needed compromise on territory. The President's "heart is in the right place" on the peace process, Afable continued, but some members of her cabinet are reluctant to compromise with the MILF, preferring to deal with the MNLF, which signed an agreement in 1996, and the politically powerful Ampatuan clan. He believed the President would agree to the compromise on territory before her State of the Nation Address July 23, and predicted a cabinet reshuffle to sell the deal and to engage more effectively with the Senate and the Supreme Court in the wake of mid-term elections. Afable indicated that he was tired of arguing with nay-sayers in the cabinet, and hoped that his departure would help force a decision. He also believed it essential that the cabinet commit to sell a deal politically, instead of leaving that job to the negotiator (him). The President gave him the opportunity to explain his views fully before he resigned, and he expected to continue to serve as an informal advisor. He told the President he accepted a position with Senator and presidential hopeful Mar Roxas, whom Afable has known for many years. Afable believed General (ret.) Rodolfo Garcia, who was later named to succeed him as chief negotiator, would do an excellent job, and that the rest of the peace negotiating team would stay intact.

¶3. (C) Malaysia was increasing the pressure to conclude the MILF agreement, Afable said. Malaysian negotiator Othman delivered a very strong message from Prime Minister Badawi

over lunch with President Arroyo in Manila June 18. Othman also met, separately, with MILF Chairman Murad and MNLF Chairman Misuari, as part of Malaysia's efforts to help unify Muslim insurgencies for peace. Afable believed MILF Chairman Murad was under great pressure from factions within the MILF.

The most difficult concession for the government was including in the new Muslim political entity the province of Sultan Kudarat, with its seven Christian municipalities comprising some 200,000 people. Asked how the politically powerful Ampatuan clan would be integrated into the peace process, Afable said the government had sufficient leverage to force their cooperation. Yet the government's reliance on the Ampatuan clan to produce votes in the just concluded midterm elections complicated the issue, Afable added.

MILF Vice Chairman

14. (C) In DCM's fourth meeting at the MILF's central Mindanao camp, Vice Chairman for Political Affairs Ghazali Jafaar welcomed more explicit statements of U.S. support for concluding a peace agreement this year, which he believed could help bring on board political players in Manila and Mindanao. He questioned the seriousness of the national government and certain cabinet members on territorial compromises. DCM said there would always be pluralism in Manila, but he believed President Arroyo was committed to the peace agreement. (Comment: Jafaar later briefed to a reporter DCM's comment on President Arroyo's commitment, which became a helpful news item in Manila newspapers.) MILF Central Committee Foreign Affairs Chair Ustadhz Duli Gayak and Secretariat Chair Muhammed Ameen, as well as Emboff, also participated in the meeting.

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15. (C) Jafaar gave an upbeat assessment of the MILF's coordination with other Muslim communities. He claimed MILF Foreign Affairs Chair Duli had met (unclear when) with MNLF Chairman Misuari's close aides, MNLF Secretary General and Cotabato Mayor Sema and the Ampatuan clan leadership. On closer questioning, however, the MILF relationships with these individuals was clearly not close. Duli attended the OIC Ministerial in Islamabad in May and expected also to represent the MILF at the Tripartite Meeting of the MNLF-Philippine Government-OIC in Jeddah in July. (Comment: The OIC has traditionally recognized the MNLF as the sole representative of Muslims in the Philippines. Its Islamabad resolution, however, called for "the MNLF and MILF and all other national components to unify their ranks...for peace and development, and requests the Secretary General to contribute further good offices for the achievement of rapprochement and coordination between them.")

16. (C) On post-peace agreement governance, Jafaar said the MILF planned to select representatives from all Mindanao communities -- Christians, MNLF, Ampatuans, Lumads, MILF -- to serve on a two or three year transition council to develop Mindanao's governance under Manila's offer of "self determination". The style of governance would be more Islamic, yet tolerant. Jafaar claimed that commands that have resisted Central Committee leadership, such as Commander Kato's 105th, would support the peace agreement. Asked how to prevent continuing fighting between the Ampatuan clan and MILF elements after a peace agreement, Jafaar said the MILF will disarm the Ampatuans. He admitted that this had not been discussed with the Ampatuans, but was confident the MILF had the power to do it.

MNLF Secretary General and Cotabato Mayor Sema

17. (C) Mayor Sema described disunity within the MNLF in a one-on-one dinner with DCM June 20, and was less optimistic on MILF-MNLF cooperation. He blamed MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari, currently under house arrest in Manila, for the

MNLF's disunity. Sema recalled how Misuari had rejected an offer by MNLF founders to reunify under Misuari's leadership in July 2005, preferring his new aides who hadn't fought in the battles of the '70's and '80s. Sema said he had just met Misuari two weeks earlier in Manila, and had come away disappointed. Misuari was now telling activists on Jolo Island and Central Mindanao to organize, train and arm themselves, Misuari claimed. He worried that the youth who heed Misuari's call could be taken advantage of by "foreigners" (read, terrorists), as had long ago happened with the Abu Saayaf, according to Sema.

18. (C) Sema agreed that now is the right time for all of Mindanao's communities to come together in support of peace, and maintained that the MNLF's 1996 agreement was the best basis for doing so. Sema pointed out that the 1996 agreement held out the prospect (never implemented) for 13 provinces of Mindanao and Palawan to become part of an autonomous region, whereas the MILF was "only" seeking certain territorial additions to the present Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. (Comment: MILF's Jafaar told DCM that the 1996 agreement was totally discredited since it had not improved the lives of Mindanaons; whether that is the result of poor implementation or a poor agreement is irrelevant, Jafaar said.) Regarding MILF-led governance after a peace agreement, Sema said Mindanao's Muslims are not ready for Islamic government. Many of their traditions do not reflect true Islamic practices, having been mixed with local traditions, and Sema indicated the MILF would find that much Islamic education was needed.

ARMM Governor Ampatuan

19. (C) In a June 27 meeting at the Manila offices of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, ARMM Governor Zaldy Ampatuan professed support for the peace process, but regretted that the ARMM (read, Ampatuans) had no role in the Government-MILF negotiations. Ampatuan recalled that he had complained to the OIC in 2005 about being left out of the MILF negotiations, and pointedly made no mention of Malaysia, the facilitator of MILF-government talks. Ampatuan indicated he was more disposed to work with, and had better contacts with, the MNLF. (Comment: Newly-elected Congressman from Sulu Jakiri, describing himself as MNLF Chief of Staff, told DCM separately that the Ampatuan clan had provided financial and political support to his candidacy.) The rest of the session with Governor Ampatuan and his staff focused on the ARMM's desire for more international development assistance.

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Comment

10. (C) Given the President's assurances to the Ambassador that she wants to conclude an agreement (reftel), we are pressing publicly and privately that now is the time. Political considerations arising from the excruciatingly slow vote counting in the mid-term elections, especially in Mindanao, have likely delayed the government's decision-making on territorial compromises. If an agreement on territory is concluded, it will become even more important to bring together all of Mindanao's communities to begin to define Mindanao's future governance. We are actively engaging a range of stakeholders to promote cooperation among Mindanao's many diverse communities.

KENNEY